

Civil Air Patrol Oral History Interview

WNHC 4.82-3

LT. COL. THOMAS H. MCBRAYER, CAP



NATIONAL HISTORICAL COMMITTEE
Headquarters CAP

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CIVIL AIR PATROL
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview

of

Lt. Col. Thomas H. McBrayer, CAP

by

Lt. Col. Lester E. Hopper, CAP

DATE: 14 August 1982

Location: Chicago, Illinois

CIVIL AIR PATROL ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

Civil Air Patrol Oral History interviews were initiated in Early 1982 by Lt. Colonel Lester E. Hopper, CAP, of the Civil Air Patrol's National Historical Committee. The overall purpose of these interviews is to record for posterity the activities of selected members of the Civil Air Patrol.

The principle goal of these histories is to increase the base of knowledge relating to the early accomplishments of Civil Air Patrol members who in their own unique way contributed to the defense of our great country. Certainly not of a secondary nature is the preservation of the contributions of individuals as Civil Air Patrol continues its growth.

FOREWORD

The following is the transcript of an oral history interview recorded on magnetic tape. Since only minor emendations have been made, the reader should consistently bear in mind that he is reading a transcript of the spoken rather than the written word. Additionally, no attempt to confirm the historical accuracy of the statements has been made. As a result, the transcript reflects the interviewee's personal recollections of a situation as he remembered it at the time of the interview.

Editorial notes and additions made by CAP historians are enclosed in brackets. If feasible, first names, ranks, or titles are also provided. Any additions, deletions and changes subsequently made to the transcript by the interviewee are not indicated. Researchers may wish to listen to the actual interview tape prior to citing the manuscript.

KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

That I, THOMAS H MCBRAYER, have this day participated in an oral-magnetic-taped interview with LT COL LESTER HOPPER CAP, covering my best recollections of events and experiences which may be of historical significance to the Civil Air Patrol.

I understand that the tape(s) and the transcribed manuscript resulting therefrom will be accessioned into the Civil Air Patrol's Historial Holdings. In the best interest of the Civil Air Patrol, I do hereby voluntarily give, transfer, convey, and assign all right, title, and interest in the memoirs and remembrances contained in the aforementioned magnetic tapes and manuscript to the Civil Air Patrol, to have and to hold the same forever, hereby relinquishing for myself, my executors, administrators, heirs, and assigns all ownership, right, title, and interest therein to the donee expressly on the condition of strict observance of the following restrictions:

NONE

THOMAS H MCBRAYER DONOR

Dated JULY 12, 1983

Accepted on behalf of the Civil Air Patrol by

Lester Hopper

Dated 18 July 1983

SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

In this oral history interview, Lt. Col. Thomas H. McBrayer, CAP, speaks candidly and interestingly regarding his brief period of CAP service in early 1942 prior to his enlistment in the Army Air Corps. He then picks up with his reassociation with CAP in 1948. He explains that his reassociation was delayed upon his return primarily due to a general lack of interest by everyone in the Civil Air Patrol Program. The major impact of this interview is the subjective analysis of CAP operations at the squadron level provided by Mr. McBrayer.

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CAP ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Number: WNH04.82-3
Taped Interview With: Lt. Col. Thomas H. McBrayer, CAP
Date of Interview: 14 August 1982
Location: Chicago, Illinois
Conducted by: Lt. Col. Lester E. Hopper, CAP

H: Tom, why don't you tell us a little about where you were born and when and all that good information.

M: I was born in Lorena, which is 10 miles south of Waco, Texas on April 27, 1908. I still live there. 74 years I've been there. I grew up there farming with my father. He was a rural mail carrier, but he farmed on the side because a rural mail carrier didn't get much pay in those days. My younger brother and I worked in a cotton field until we graduated from Lorena High School and went to Baylor University. The main reason we went to Baylor was not so much in search of an education, but to get out of that goll durned cotton patch. I just headed around pillar to post doing odd jobs until 1926 when I became my Dad's substitute on his rural route in Lorena. Later on I went to Houston to make my fortune. I landed there just about the time the 1929 crash happened. Very soon I was back in Lorena because I got hungry. In 1933 I opened a filling station in Lorena, or a service station as you call them now, but a filling station then. Got married September 22, 1933. Ran that station until I was made Lorena postmaster in 1941. I remember when the Civil Air Patrol started, it got my

attention. Incidentally, I had some flying background. My first ride was in a Curtis Jennie one of those OX5 deals for \$5 bucks which was 2 weeks work. And then I started going to the Waco Municipal Airport catching rides. About 1935 I started flying instructions for \$3.00 for 30 minutes. Those sessions were few and far between because those \$3.00 were hard to come by then. Being I was married and didn't have much income. I soloed in a brand new Taylor Craft May 28, 1939. Jack Newland was my instructor. He was one of the best in the west. The next thing I knew the war broke out. I was still flying a little on the side. So my flying took a back seat until I got out in 45 and then went into this Army training program whatever you call it.

H: You went into the Army during the war?

M: Yes, I was in the Army and worked as a postmaster. I went right into the Army, just right into the postal service.

H: So, you were during the war years, actually in the Army.

M: Ya, Ya. One of the reasons I joined the CAP, I thought it was going to lead me into the Air Force. Like most of the other people who were in there, they thought that's going to be one giant step into the Air Force.

H: When did you join CAP, before you went into the Army?

M: April 1942. I think pretty close to my birthday. Of course, I didn't keep up my connections during the war, but I picked them up soon as I got back out.

H: When did you go into the Army?

M: I went in the Army April 1942, came back December 5, 1945, my Dad's birthday..

H: Okay, well why don't you go ahead. During those months you were in CAP, what did you do?

M: Oh, that's when James Connally was the air base for navigators over across the river in Waco. We also had the Waco Army Airfield where the Bamboo bombers trained. But we went over to James Connally and drilled at least one night a week for two hours. They drilled us just like we was regular GI's. We went through various phases of training. Some secret stuff, It was secret then. I don't see why it was, but they claimed it was. Got a little radio work. Then got to go through most of the aircraft. We were partly on the inside, but the training didn't have a whole lot to do with aircraft. Mostly drilling. And we didn't have but about three aircraft in the squadron then. Old Monocoupe and J3 Cub and an old Waco, we practiced various interception problem, you know, enemy over here at this point. We got to fly over there and intercept them, all like that, you know. We flew triangles,

triangulation and stuff.

H: Okay, you were flying during that period, then.

M: I was flying.

H: Were you a flight officer or what was your rank?

M: We weren't very rank conscious during those days. Just about everybody was just about his own captain. Well, I remember, now we did have a captain or somebody over us. But I don't think many of us was rank conscious. I wasn't, I know. I didn't care if I was a PFC or a 2nd Lieutenant.

H: Did you have uniforms?

M: We had uniforms, just like that book of pictures you showed me.

H: Okay, with the red epaulettes and CAP patch.

M: We had the same thing. We did have those, we called them shoulder boards.

H: Shoulder boards, okay.

M: Red shoulder boards. And I remember the GI's, the draftees over at James Connally, they sort of snickered at us. Wearing

those red things. You know you could hear one of them say Boy Scout or something. It didn't do us any good. But we got along pretty good. I remember one night we were out there drilling, and one of the barracks got to laughing and making cat calls. Well, this drill sergeant was an old timer and regular just went over the barracks, called them all out and drilled them for three hours.

H: Let you all do the cat calling, uh?

M: They never bothered us one more minute, I guarantee you that. Oh, lot of things like that. Just hard to remember.

H: Well, did you do any searches for airplanes or anything like that? During that period before you went into the Army?

M: Very few. I got in on a few as an observer. I could fly the plane all right but I didn't have a license then. I remember being down to Galveston on one flight, for some reason. I don't know, maybe it was just training flight. We just went down there to observe. But it wasn't in a bigger plane than a J3, I forgot now what it was. We could have gone in some of those from James Connally, we weren't in with the Bamboo Bomber group. We were just over at James Connally. Waco Air Force Base didn't have a thing to do with us. Well, let me think. It's all so vague. The trouble is, my memory before the war I can remember pretty good, but the war chopped out a whole bunch of

stuff. I can't remember. I wasn't really in the shooting war. Course I was in the post office. But I was down in New Guinea. Place I'd heard of but didn't believe. But I found out. There is a New Guinea.

H: There were a bunch of planes there?

M: Oh gosh, Phillipines, Tachloven, Leyte, your're not getting much out of me today.

H: No, that's all right. We're just letting things take their own course. So you actually were in CAP about four months before you went in the Army.

M: Something like that.

H: Now, when you came from the Army, how fast did you get back to CAP?

M: A couple of years.

H: A couple of years?

M: Oh, ya, it was a couple of years. Maybe three, because CAP had just wilted. Right there in Waco.

H: Folded up, huh?

M: It just folded. Well, there was nobody to take charge.
By 1948 or 49 I believe we were going gung ho again.

H: Okay.

M: And by 1957 or 58 we carried a drill team to New York. And we carried them again in 59, two straight years Texas, Waco squadron won a Texas drill competition.

H: How did, what got you back into the program in 1948, Tom?

M: Well, I got back flying again and some of my buddies mentioned going again, why don't you get in. Well, I finally worked back up to where I was CO. Most of my duties were fiscal. I kept the books. That's been the story of my life. I belong to a flying club and I am treasurer and secretary, keep the books.

H: That's what you get for being honest.

M: I guess so. But they lay it on me. Keep the books for the Lorena Fire Department.

H: What did you all do in 1948?

M: Not a whole lot, there wasn't much to do. The fear of war was gone. We were never going to have another war. So I think the Air Force sort of disassociated themselves with us. Well

not actually disassociate, but they weren't very helpful. I've forgotten then when they started to help us the most. We did occupy an old abandoned Army barracks out there at the Waco Army Airfield which is now the Waco-Madison Cooper Municipal Airport. And we occupied that until they tore them down about the late 60s. Now the group meets in the conference room in the airport in the terminal building. Real nice set up. The group meets down in the hangar. I mean the squadron, the cadet squadron meets, no I take that back, they meet in the National Guard Building.

H: What was the name of that aquadron back in the 40s and 50s?

M: Waco, I guess.

H: Just called the Waco squadron.

M: And as for the cadets, I don't remember.

H: How about in 1948, did you all have cadets or just seniors?

M: Had cadets and that's when we started the cadet program. That's when the Air Force, I doubt if it was the Air Force then, and the CAP leaders decided that if we were going to continue we had to have cadets. And for a while I thought that was silly but I was wrong as it developed some good people. The cadets that were there in 48, they are leaders

somewhere else now. They're good old men. This is 82. And now we have us a darn good cadet squadron down there, but it fluctuates. You get a bunch in there together maybe when they're 14 years old and stay there till they graduate, by the time they get that far together they are a unit. That's the reason the drill team won twice in a row, the same group won two years in a row.

H: How did you all do when you got to New York?

M: Well, we won fifth one time and sixth another. The first time up the darn Hawaiians came down the stairway. We drilled in Rockefeller Plaza, and you'd walk down a bunch of steps into the rotunda. And they marched down there singing an Hawaiian chant. And that got them #1 right there. But they weren't supposed to sing or say a word while they were drilling. They broke the rules but they got #1 anyway. The 2nd time I don't remember who won then. But we stayed at the old airbase there on Long Island, Mitchel Field. We stayed out there, very nice and we got to see New York. In an Air Force bus.

H: What kind of aircraft did you have in the squadron in that particular period, I mean 48 to 58.

M: Aeronca.

H: Was it CAP or Army issue?

M: It was CAP. Tandem, Aeronca, 65 Horse engine. And we flew the wings off that darn thing. That's when we really started giving cadet rides, orientation rides, back in the early 50s. And that was quite a thing. To be able to check out and to be able to give a cadet a ride was something everybody looked forward to, including myself. But we finally wore that thing out. We didn't have an airplane for about a year while we rebuilt it there at James Connally. The Air Force boys helped us rebuild it. We put seconite covering on that thing and rubbed it with hot irons. We really handfinished it. That's when Tyler was headquarters for the Texas Wing. We flew it over there one day on business relating to the fact that we had been wanting a T34 and were about 14th in line. Col. Luther Bogard was the Texas Wing Commander, and he took one look at that Aeronca and said you all can have a T34. Anybody who would put that kind of work in an airplane and keep it up like that we know will keep up a T34. So we got us a T34 right quick.

H: Did you get to keep your Aeronca too?

M: Ya, we got to keep it too. That was mostly for cadet orientation. And we used that T34 till about 75 and then the powers that be decide that a T34 was not a good search plane. You ever been in one?

H: Yep.

M: Well to me it's got excellent visibility in all parts back to front, but they decreed we should have 172's so we could have 8 eyeballs on a search instead of 4. So we sold the T34 and the Aeronca for \$15,000 and bought a new 1975 Cessna 172 which we still have. It's equipped for IFR flying. Of course we don't fly IFR unless we get caught in weather.

H: How about your search activity back in those late 40s, early 50s, did you search for many missing aircraft?

M: No, not much because you didn't have that much flying going on. As people acquired more money and the youngsters grew up they acquired their airplanes, they also acquired the knack of just flying into the wild blue yonder without notifying anybody. That's really what happens a lot. So and so is missing from his home base and we don't know where he went. So how are you going to find out which way to go. As a result we always tried to stress in our flight clinics that if you're going to fly, file a flight plan. They still don't do it though. The ELT is very good, but they do go off in hangars or with a hard landing. We checked out many an airport and found the missing airplane right there. The guy had gone home and gone to bed without closing out his flight plan. The darndest thing we found last year, a wife reported her husband missing on a flight to somewhere. I think it was maybe up in the Dallas area. Anyway, somebody that knew where the guy was going got a hold of some CAP fellow and told him that this

guy was shackled up with his girl friend in Dallas. And that's where they found him. I think the divorce came shortly after. (Laughter) But that kind of stuff just runs you crazy. Trying to figure out, put yourself in their place, where are they going, why would they land there. Frustrating.

H: Mostly your activities during the 40s and 50s and 60s were sort of training and things of that nature?

M: Mostly training. We always had a training program going. We had a training officer. We'd sit there just like we were in the classroom. Wouldn't be too long. We had of course a safety officer who was always getting up spouting about something. Which is a good thing. You can forget those safety things right quick. But we had a pretty good program. I always tried to attend all the meetings around the country, especially the National Board Meetings. I guess the most rewarding I attended was the Southwest Regional Conference. Went to Phoenix, or Oklahoma, or New Orleans, had it in Dallas once. I believe we had one in New Mexico one time. Albuquerque, ya. And usually when James Connally was there they would furnish an airlift for it. They had those T29 Flying classroom with 11 desks in them. Navigating training school it was. They finally moved that to Sacramento. And now that airbase is the Texas State Technical Institute. Have about 5,000 students there who are taught to use their hands to make a living. It's a very worthy field. There's four of them in

Texas. Waco is the home base. That is something we've been needing out there all along. But I do miss the T29's.

H: Well, that's the period that we're principally interested in. Any other comments, Tom?

M: Now we did have schools. At every meeting we had some kind of training or some kind of reporting, we had something going on all the time. And the cadets, that's when we had most of our cadets, during those years. There's very few cadets now a days. Around Waco anyway. The cadets always kept us on our toes. We had to be pretty good as they were pretty darn sharp. One way or the other they'd let you know about it if you goofed up.

H: That's where the cadets are pushing the seniors.

M: I guarantee you that. They'd spot a loose button a mile away. And some way they'd let you know about it. Sir, your pocket is unbuttoned, in a quavering voice. And then you were supposed to congratulate them on their sharpness.

H: Well that was kind of an interesting period. We went through a turmoil right after the war when everybody just kind of dropped CAP.

M: Nobody wanted to do anything that pertained to war. And that

did pertain to war. Sooner or later the younger ones came along and started pushing the older ones. The old ones got busy again. We've never had any drive for members in Waco, but every once in awhile through the years we would make a find or something spectacular which got in the newspaper with a good write-up. It just happened the city editor was a pilot himself and a good friend of mine who was interested in Civil Air Patrol. He wasn't a member but he was a good reporter. For a while I was Information Officer and could give him any kind of story and he would print it. Every once in awhile he'd get up a good one and we'd have 3 or 4 new members come in. I think the most we ever had was 9 who came in after one of these stories. I think in that story the man included the fact that we needed more people to do the work. One of those fellows who came in that night is Group 12 Commander right now. He hadn't been in but about 12 or 15 years. He just went right up like that. I never did aspire to that. I did make squadron commander. I didn't want to go any higher. I stayed busy on searches even though I never did go on a search at night. When I'd get a call in the middle of the day or something, plane down between Eagle Pass and San Antonio, I would go. For awhile my wife would say, there's a lot of others in Waco, why don't you let them go? One day I told her, "Now, babe, what if that was me missing? Would you want those other fellows to stay at home?" You know from that day, when I'd get a phone call, she'd start getting my clothes together.

H: She understands it now.

M: She understands it thoroughly now.

H: I agree, most CAP wives are quite helpful in a lot of areas.

M: They have to be. She wasn't for a long time, but she certainly is now.

H: Is she in the program?

M: No, she has never been in an airplane with me. She'll fly commercial and that's all. I tried to sneak around and get some of the other boys to take her up. To just let her get the feel of it, cause I know she'd be scared as hell if it was me flying the plane.

H: You're right, they don't have too much faith in us, do they, Tom? (laughter)

M: But anyway she never would go. She just made up her mind. Well, her younger brother was killed in a naval crash in 1939 out in San Francisco. That sort of soured her on flying then. Matter of fact I soloed the airplane with her sitting out in the car at the municipal building and she didn't even know it. I was flying two or three years before she found it out. And she then pitched a fit. She asked me why I did it. I said I

knew you'd talk me out of it. Well, I just sent ahead my way.

H: What do you consider is the single most attractive feature of the program today? You mentioned that searches and newspaper releases with regard to them seem to attract people, is that it?

M: Well, that gets the public interested. Like those 9 people that came in, they were attracted by us making a find. And this fellow described how we went through the whole mess. And mess is a good word. Most of the SARCAPS are. It just has little bit of a pull to it. Just like the Air Force, Silver wings and all that jazz. You're flying an airplane looking for a downed man, you're doing a good thing. But that's not the main reason for Civil Air Patrol. That's one of the reasons. We also got aerospace education, we have a cadet program, we got three or four programs all tied together. I believe this AOPA association is going to help us greatly and I believe this Boy Scout deal will also.

H: I agree both of those will help.

M: I think both of those, if we can interact like that, are going to strengthen all three of us. Including AOPA.

H: Well, I feel like there are a lot of us who are already AOPA members, but we're going to get some that aren't, and vice versa.

M: Oh ya, that's right. Well, my AOPA number is 1272. I joined May '39 which is when they started.

H: It's a very worthwhile organization. We'd be in bad shape if they weren't there to lobby for us.

M: Ooh, brother. I got a letter from J. B. Hartranft a couple months ago. He said there was 139 ahead of me, or 138 ahead of me and I'm #139 on the roll. And he remarked that isn't it ironic when you joined it cost only \$3.00. And I hadn't thought of that, it's not so ironic at all. In those days I could buy 30 minutes of flying time for \$3.00. And one Saturday when it was too rainy to fly I used that \$3.00 to join the AOPA (laughter).

H: Trade out.

M: I traded out and have enjoyed AOPA all these years as I have CAP.

H: Well, Tom, thanks for your time in providing us with an insight into CAP operations from your point of view.